

THE SURVIVORS

* Excerpts *

The morning we buried mother the sun was shining. In the previous weeks she had spoken with more ease as if the gradual decay of her mind also removed the barriers, she had set herself decades ago. I was not surprised to learn the true reason why my grandfather had been to prison. Under a glaring January sun, I walked down the yew-lined avenue to the exit of the cemetery of Basel in the company of my two older sisters; and I felt lighthearted.

It is night and you stand at the window. Although you were told not to, you slipped out of your bed because of the aircrafts. You can hear them before you see them. You are six years old and these are American bombers crossing over Basel into Germany. There, at the window in this night towards the end of the war you decided to become a pilot. That's what you told me, Max.

My grandfather always sat in a wicker chair in the kitchen of his attic flat when we visited him in Feuerthalen. Most of the time my mother first went up to him alone, we waited in my aunt's living-room . I sat on the corner bench the white table cloth like a frozen pond in front of me. There was apple juice and cake, Linzertorte with a thick crust, that had to be eaten up. My aunt chatted with my father, sometimes my two sisters were present as well. When my mother came downstairs again, she first talked to Mina, my aunt. My father asked me something. By the time I had answered, the two women had come to an agreement.

Sometimes my mother joined us at the table and after she too had eaten a piece of Linzertorte we drove back to Basel. Sometimes she asked us to get up, smoothed our hair, our blouses and we followed her up the steps to the attic.

The kitchen smelled of things I didn't like to eat. The wicker chair stood beside the window. It creaked when grandfather moved. His watery eyes rested on me, warily, it seemed to me. While he was talking to my mother I observed his angular skull with the white tufts of hair at the temples, the crooked nose, its tip reaching over his narrow lips. His voice was hoarse. I don't think he ever addressed a word to me and after a while I returned with my mother downstairs to aunt Mina, relieved and disappointed at the same time.

A Sunday afternoon in the height of the summer of 1968, brimstone butterflies float in the garden. My father is sitting under the red white striped parasol and working. My sisters doze in the deckchairs, my mother is cleaning up in the kitchen, or maybe she went for a nap.

When the bell rings, I'm sent to the front door. I'm thirteen years old and before me stands Elvis Presley. Was it like that or was that what I imagined later? You wear a checkered shirt, blue jeans, and you have brushed your hair in a quiff. That's how you sit in the photograph in the deckchair in our garden in Riehen that summer afternoon. I couldn't believe that you were my cousin.

I don't know any more what you told us that afternoon, Max. In the photograph you look happy and only later I understood that you had something to do with the war in Vietnam that we watched in black and white in the tv news. You invite us for dinner to an Italian restaurant and it is the first time I see somebody paying with a credit card. After dinner you say good-bye in front of the restaurant in the light summer night. It takes thirty-three years until I see you again.

Like the story of every family mine is invented. I pieced it together from what I was told, what I remembered, from things thought-out and dreamed-up the way it seems right today. However, it might soon appear quite differently, as we form the past again and again in the search of an explanation for our present and in the hope of a future.

(Pages 9 – 11)

MINA

March 25th 1940

It's like Grand Central Station here as each child comes and goes at a different time. Gertrud excels at school. Lisbeth makes nice progress in roller-skating. She was on the sidewalk yesterday and today. From St. Gallen I received a respectable order: 8 pairs of socks, 2 pairs of stockings. Work in abundance.

When Mina sat at the knitting machine after the children had gone to bed, she sometimes turned on the radio that Oscar had bought. Transports of troops and material were observed north of the border. Mina pulled the slide over the needle bed with a gentle shrumm. Each Swiss was to get an identity card, children under fourteen identification tags on which the names of their parents were noted. Shrumm. The troops at the border of Schaffhausen would delay an invasion for two days at best. The wealthy brought their furniture and silver to safety in their houses in the mountains, shrumm, others opened bank accounts in the USA. Money bag patriots Alfred called them. Lord Mayor Bringolf informed the population at public events about a possible evacuation. Certain circles, it was reported on radio, tried to push the county into terror and confusion by spreading rumors. Fear, someone said, was the enemy within. At the beginning of April Germany attacked Denmark and Norway.

Mother and Hildi sat in the living-room as Mina came to the bakery Tuesday before Pentecost. In this night, it was said, the Germans would come. Hildi's face was white. On her way home she had seen the miners preparing the last bridges and railway flyovers for demolition in order to separate Schaffhausen from Switzerland. Karl, her young man, and she had been engaged in secret for a long time. She had met him in the Commercial Association where they took the same courses. Karl's father worked for Swiss Railways, his parents lived in the station of Schaffhausen. He really was a Catholic. Mother seemed to know everything. Mina was astonished that she had not been told anything. Did they believe that she would disclose it to father or Oskar? She didn't get a chance to ask Hildi, if she was really going to marry this Karl Freiner, she had to get back to her children. On her way home she met fully

packed cars, people on bicycles, with backpacks and hand carts, who came from the Rhine bridge. The tower of the Munot loomed in the evening sky and for a moment she wondered if she saw it for the last time. The girls had set the table. There was cheese toast for dinner and yesterday's strawberry tartlets Mother had given her to take along.

May 15th 1940

Neither the gardener nor the mason appeared today. I think these men are more afraid than me, as I would not dream of not continuing to plant the garden. For any evacuation we have prepared more or less everything in greatest sobriety and laid it out ready in the red cabinet in the basement. Quite a few pieces of clothing are still missing. At the payroll office was a great crush. All military wives, I presume. I received the nice sum of 178.10 for which I thank you sincerely.

The Germans didn't come in the "Night of Panic" and the following morning the sun was shining as in the days before. The beds had to be planted up straight away if they wanted to harvest something in the autumn. Mina wondered if she should get a few rabbits. In the evening she went down to the Rhine and looked across the river. The German gardens on the other side did not look different from her own.

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VERA

How did you bear it? Vera asked when aunt Mina showed her the letters she had sent to Oskar during the war. She had taken the closely written pages from the old suitcase in the garage where Oskar had kept them – some of them stained, crumpled – and ordered them with his answers on solid GF business paper. Now the correspondence was laid out on the living-room table sorted by years. Vera asked what was going to happen with it. As a child she was sure that aunt Mina considered her to be wayward compared with her own daughters. Now, she felt a closeness with the old woman, she could not explain. During her visits to the house that was always a bit cold and smelt of the farm yard they talked about things Mina had read in the paper, Vera's life abroad, their gardens and sometimes aunt Mina spoke about the past. The letters on the living-room table attracted Vera as if they contained an explanation for her own being.

It was a chicanery, aunt Mina said, when Vera mentioned the fear that had spread through Switzerland in the spring of 1940. The German troop movements at the border were supposed to mislead the French. Empty railway trains were shifted, cast-off army material put in position. A “brilliantly camouflaged howitzer battery” viewed from Switzerland turned out to be an old stove pipe, the shots that were heard in the night of the 15th of May were fired by Swiss troops and the armored train crossing the border at Thayngen without stopping really was the last regular passenger train. But the fear, replied Vera, was genuine.

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In his filing cabinets Vera’s father had also kept a folder with newspaper cuttings marked “Bombing”. He had only ever talked about finding the unscathed wallet of his father in the ruins of his parents’ flat, containing loose banknotes, exactly as it had been put on the sideboard to pay the rent. As long as he lived the thought of delving into the American airstrike never crossed Vera’s mind. It was a piece of her father’s past and to question him about it would have felt inappropriate. Only after his death when she read the newspaper clippings, she understood that the bombing concerned her too.

There was a silence in Vera’s head when she discovered the name of her grandmother, Anna Freiner, on the detailed drawing of the bombarded railway station of Schaffhausen, in the kitchen above the dispatch office. In its center the bomb was marked, a point with seven bristles. The name of her grandfather, Josef Freiner, was written in the station office beside the ticket desk. On the small circle beside it was a little cross as well.

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MAX

The wind on the rice paddies is caused by the rotors. Max sees the shadow of the Huey glide across it, hears the cries at his back. It is always the same word – He gets up and goes to the window. The moon shimmers on the roof of the pavilion in which Vera’s pupated butterflies are hanging. She herself lays in her bed just a few meters away from him. She liked his tales.

Her mouth became softer while he talked, she laughed about the white boot. The instructor at flight school shouted at him when he stepped on the left pedal for the first time tipping the helicopter to the side. After the second time he forced Max to paint his right boot white and to operate only this pedal. To yield on the right was enough to swing the chopper to the left. Vera didn't ask about Vietnam, but of course she wanted to know how it was. Everybody wanted to know, as if madness could be described. The trick was not to see the madness. Kill 'em all and let God sort 'em out – the motto of the Hornets was simple. A few days with them was enough to turn anyone crazy, and most of them probably had been insane before. You had to give in to the madness, not believe that you control it. Just take it. Max thinks of Ed with his dead son. Nobody had told them that God would sort them out as well.

After the cheese and fruit they had instead of dessert, Jens bid them good-night and for a moment Max hoped he would remain alone in the kitchen with Vera. But she too wanted to go to bed. They would talk tomorrow. Her moonlight butterfly house looks like a giant incubator. Is Vera not able to have children or didn't Jens want any? Every woman wants children. Max wasn't cross with Jane for getting pregnant without telling him. When his contract in Teheran expired, she wanted to go to Switzerland. In Zermatt he picked half-frozen climbers out of rock faces. When Amber was born, he put the baby into his chopper and flew up to the Matterhorn with her. But he couldn't stand the Swiss, they were dishonest, and after a few months they returned to the US. Minneapolis. He started to work for the TV station. Ginger was born, then Cissy. Straightaway he saw that Cissy resembled his mother, with her pale little face. None of his other children seems so vulnerable to him and he wanted to protect her from everything. Jane loved the girls like mothers love their children. His mother had loved him too. In her house in Carmel Max found his school reports, sports badges, the tornado article from the *Star and Tribune* and the letters he had written her from the bakery. He read them again. He had forgotten that grandmother had secretly handed him back the tips the old fellow had taken from him when he returned from the bread rounds. Max tore up the letters. Even the postcard on which he had reported that he had been accepted at flight school.

In the pre-course they learned parachuting. Every day he sat between the others in the Cessna and saw the landing field below him get smaller. The familiar dizziness struck him. When they reached jump height, one after the other dropped out of the porthole. Max was sweating. The others were younger than him, wanted to get the military services behind them. Vietnam

doesn't count, they said. Under the aviator suit the sweat was running down Max' chest. After the last one had jumped, the pilot flew the Cessna back to the camp with Max. Shortly before the plane set down on the landing strip the dizziness disappeared. Until the day they pushed him out of the porthole. After that he couldn't get enough. On the last day of the pre-course he absolutely had to get up once more, on his own, when nobody else wanted to join him. The pilot could be paid. Max jumped, dropped, maybe a bit longer than usual, until he pulled the line. His parachute blocked. He fell. The reserve parachute was packed especially, cost ten Dollars extra. He hesitated. When his parachute finally opened, he was too low. He crashed. Thirty-three fractures. Six months in a plaster jacket. He started flight school a year later with a metal plate in his thigh.

Between the trees the river is shimmering in the moon light, beyond is the marsh. In the marsh bodies outlast for centuries. The bones dissolve, but the skin only gets tanned and one can recognize the facial expression of the death. Max returns to bed and pulls the duvet up. The smell is unbearable. He gets up again and removes the covers from cushion and duvet. When he puts them into the red cabinet, an inexplicable fear touches him.

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VERA

From time to time the woman stops to point at a plant: coconuts, bananas, cumquats, loganberries, pink dragonfruit. Vera seems to see a *Heliophorus brahma* in one of the gardens, but it is only a small Painted Lady.

This morning while Daniel talked to the head of the recently opened Institute of Genetics, Vera looked at the magazines displayed in the waiting room. In one of them there were photographs of newborn babies with harelips, distorted bodies, missing limbs, skull-less heads, without eyes, without spine, intestines turned to the outside. The urge to find a guilty part for the malformations has to be located in the genetic string that Daniel turns into a double helix in his fingers, when he talks about his work, like other human abilities and defects.

The woman leads them on a path between the gardens to the bank of the river. There, in the shadow of trees a skiff with a semicircular roof is moored as if it had slipped from a fairytale.

As they come closer Vera sees the white curtains, the wicker chairs and the bowl filled with fruit on the low table.

Soundless the sampan is floating on the water of the Mekong. Here and there tin huts on stilts reach into the water. Children splash between hyacinth islands, laugh at them, laugh about them. They pass under bridges made of planks, along fish traps, cross ferries, on which people, mopeds and animals are brought from one side of the river to the other. In one place domes of brick ovens rise out of the palm trees like huge beehives, and the woman explains that they were used to bake clinker slaps. She has a bluish black mole under her right eye. A kingfisher flies from the underbrush and Daniel tries to take a picture of it. For a moment Vera looks at his profile, the small lines around his eyes. Your husband, the woman with the mole says, and Vera does not correct her.

The fan murmurs above Vera when she wakes in the night. She can feel the warmth of Daniel's body beside her and the low gurgling of the water under the skiff. The woman with the mole has tightened the mosquito net around the bed and it takes a moment for Vera to find a way out.

Softly she closes the sliding door to the sleeping cabin behind her. The sky is starless. Vera thinks of grandfather in his wicker chair and the way he looked at her. With his tyranny, his contempt, his violence he shaped the lives of his children and grandchildren, and maybe he also saw what would become of her.

The wicker chair creaks under Vera's weight. Would she have found an explanation in the letters that Mina burnt, the memories that her mother forgot? Butterflies don't think, don't dream and during pupation every muscle, nearly every nerve cell in their body is transformed. But they remember scents they had smelled as caterpillars. Vera remembers the silence spreading in her when the little kicks in her belly had stopped. After a while she returns to the sleeping cabin. The bed is cool and while she snuggles up to Daniel's body, she thinks that she didn't come to Vietnam for the past, but for the present.

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